

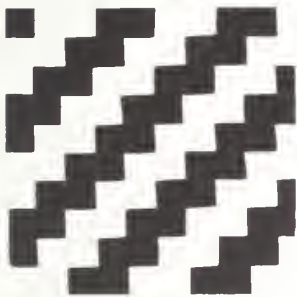
Abstract Design in American Quilts





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Abstract Design in American Quilts

BY JONATHAN HOLSTEIN

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART. NEW YORK

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COVER RAINBOW STRIPES PENNSYEVANIA. CA.
1860. COTTON. 73 X 80", .

EXHIBITION DATES

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK
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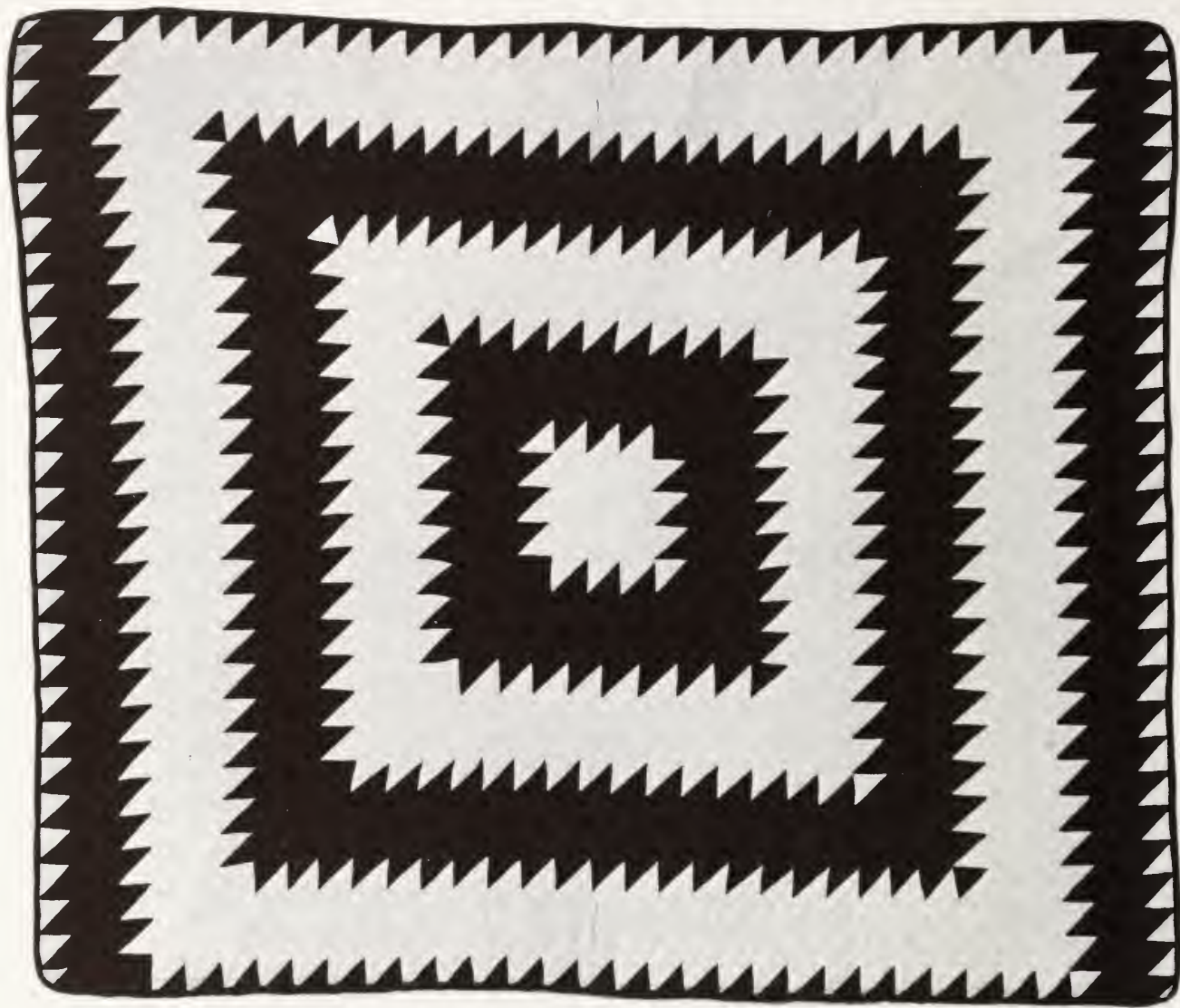
PHOTOGRAPHS BY O. E. NELSON

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To Miss Alice Beer, Curator of Textiles at the
Cooper-Hewitt Museum, Smithsonian Institu-
tion, Milton Sondag, Assistant Curator, and
Miss Sandra Shaffer of the same institution, we
are grateful for sharing their knowledge of textiles.

J. H.

For Barnett Newman



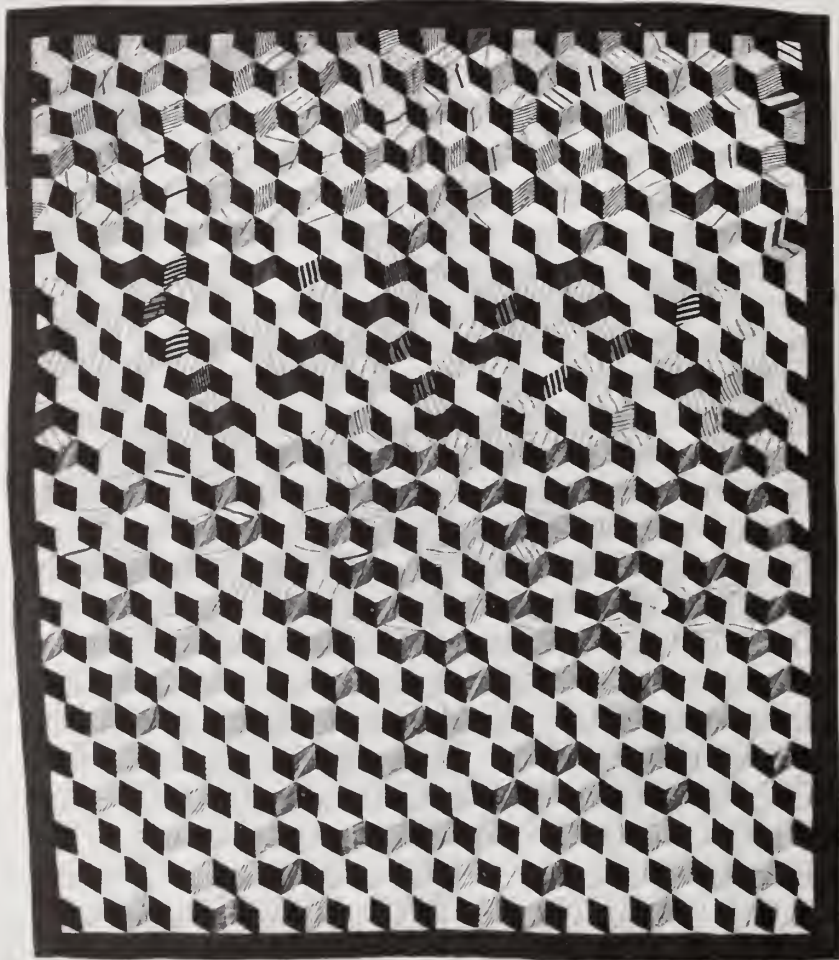
"Sawtooth." Massachusetts. ca. 1875. Cotton. $77\frac{1}{2}$ x $88\frac{1}{2}$.

This exhibition is not a comprehensive review of quilt-making in America, but rather a demonstration of inherent regard for a tangible form of visual satisfaction. Considerations of technique, geographical distinction and historic significance have been excluded in favor of visual content. Color, pattern and line take precedent over fabric, stitching and regional traits. Therefore, the exhibition is devoted to "pieced" quilts because that tech-

nique produced a body of work notable for its strong visual qualities.

The Whitney Museum of American Art is indeed grateful to Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof. The exhibition was selected entirely from the extensive collection of American quilts which they have assembled. They prepared each piece for showing and wrote the catalogue. We are indebted to them for their concern and untiring efforts.

Robert Doty, *Curator*



"Quilting" is simply joining layers of materials together by stitching them through. It is an ancient, practical and decorative craft. Quilting produced padding for armor, clothes, bed and window hangings, and bed covers. Quilts usually have a top, the part that carries the main design, a back, and filler. There are three main types: plain, applique, and pieced. Plain quilts carry the design in the quilting stitches. Applique and pieced quilts have tops composed of different materials stitched together, but in different techniques. The tops of applique quilts are made from pieces cut from whole cloth and stitched onto another piece of material. Pieced quilts use pieces of material, usually small, joined by stitching. Pieces are merely random sizes and shapes or cut according to a preconceived pattern. There, the maker followed a system of shapes and colors which produced a usually geometric design.

The overall design of both applique and pieced quilts is generally built from blocks which repeat a single distinct pattern, but form a larger design when they are combined to make the finished top, each block's part linking to those which adjoin it to form patterns of line, form and color. It is inherent in the nature of this technique that the overall design will be abstract. The rigid geometry which determines the relationships within each block, and, in turn, the relations of the blocks and their parts to each other in the larger design imposes

a formal abstract pattern on the quilt. "Crazy" or random patterned quilts are also usually organized in a formal sense, the maker fitting the irregular parts together in a way which satisfied her aesthetically. There may be a secondary design in the quilting stitches which tie the top, back, and filler together.

Americans have been making quilts for over 300 years. The quilts the first colonists brought with them were quickly worn out with hard use. There was no native cloth industry, little cloth coming from Europe, and the rigorous climate demanded warm bed clothing. So the first quilts made here were almost certainly "crazy" or random-patterned; salvageable scraps of material, from whatever source, sewn together into useable covers. None of these very early pieced quilts have survived; they too were simply worn out.

Before the seventeenth century was out, however, home industry was providing necessary materials for local use, and there was some cloth coming from abroad. While family weaving continued to provide cloth for home use through the nineteenth century, by the middle of the eighteenth those who could afford it had their choice of both native-made and imported fabrics in a wide variety of weaves, styles and colors, and quilts, which used all of these materials, covered the beds of the land. The craft flourished through the nineteenth century, and is still being practiced with virtuosity.

While we may cherish their associations, admire their beauty or understand their utilitarian value, it is hard for us now to appreciate the importance of quilts as a creative outlet. They absorbed the

inventive energies of generations of American women, and much of their time not devoted to the maintenance of families. It was welcome work, however, often the only escape from grinding labor, the only means of expressing feelings for color and design. Considerable testimony exists to the solace the hard-pressed settler-woman found in "working" her quilts. While they were necessary for survival, quilts were also for show, perhaps the only or main spot of color and strong visual excitement in the house. The "best" went on the guest bed, where the feminine skills of the house could be assessed and admired. (It might be mentioned that men also designed and made quilts.) Applique quilts were generally considered "better" in the past, as whole cloth was expensive and often hard to obtain, whereas pieced quilts could be made from the scrap bag, pieces left over from clothesmaking.

As might be expected, needlework was a highly valued handicraft. In colonial times, little girls were taught to sew at ages when they would not now be acceptable in nursery schools. In many parts of the country, well into the nineteenth century, girls, by the time they were of marriageable age, were expected to have twelve and one—twelve everyday and one best—tops ready for quilting. At the quilting bee, the great women's social institution of the nineteenth century, finished tops were spread on the quilting frame over previously stretched backs and laid-on filler, and communally stitched.

There were literally hundreds of designs for pieced quilt blocks. Some were cherished in certain regions, some spread with migrations across the

country, their names changing to reflect new circumstances. What was the "Ship's Wheel" in New England became the "Prairie Star" in the midwest. Designs were drawn from, among other subjects, politics ("Burgoyne Surrounded," "Whig's Defeat," "Nelson's Victory"), religion ("Delectable Mountains," "World Without End," "Star of the East"), the American experience ("Rocky Road to Kansas," "Yankee Pride," "Underground Railroad") and nature ("Bear's Paw," "Duck's Foot in the Mud," "Birds in the Air," "Harvest Sun," "Prickly Pear," "Ocean Waves"). The designs of pieced blocks were abstractions of these images and ideas, almost always in rectilinear form because they were built up from scissor-cut pieces precisely measured so that each block would be the same size and the formal relationships of the pieces maintained within the design. And straight lines are much easier to sew than curved. It was also an exercise in frugality; boughten cloth was expensive, home-made took much labor, and this was the logical way to get the most from each precious remnant of material.

Fashion also influenced the look of pieced quilts, since most were made from clothes-making scraps. When fashion dictated somber clothing, quilts became darker-hued; in times of gayer dress, quilts were livelier. Sometimes cotton was favored, other times silks, wools, velvets, each working differently in the design and on the eye, always reflecting

*Opposite: "Crazy" in strips. Vermont. ca. 1860.
Cotton. 88½ x 78.*



the mood of their times, romantic, exuberant, withdrawn.

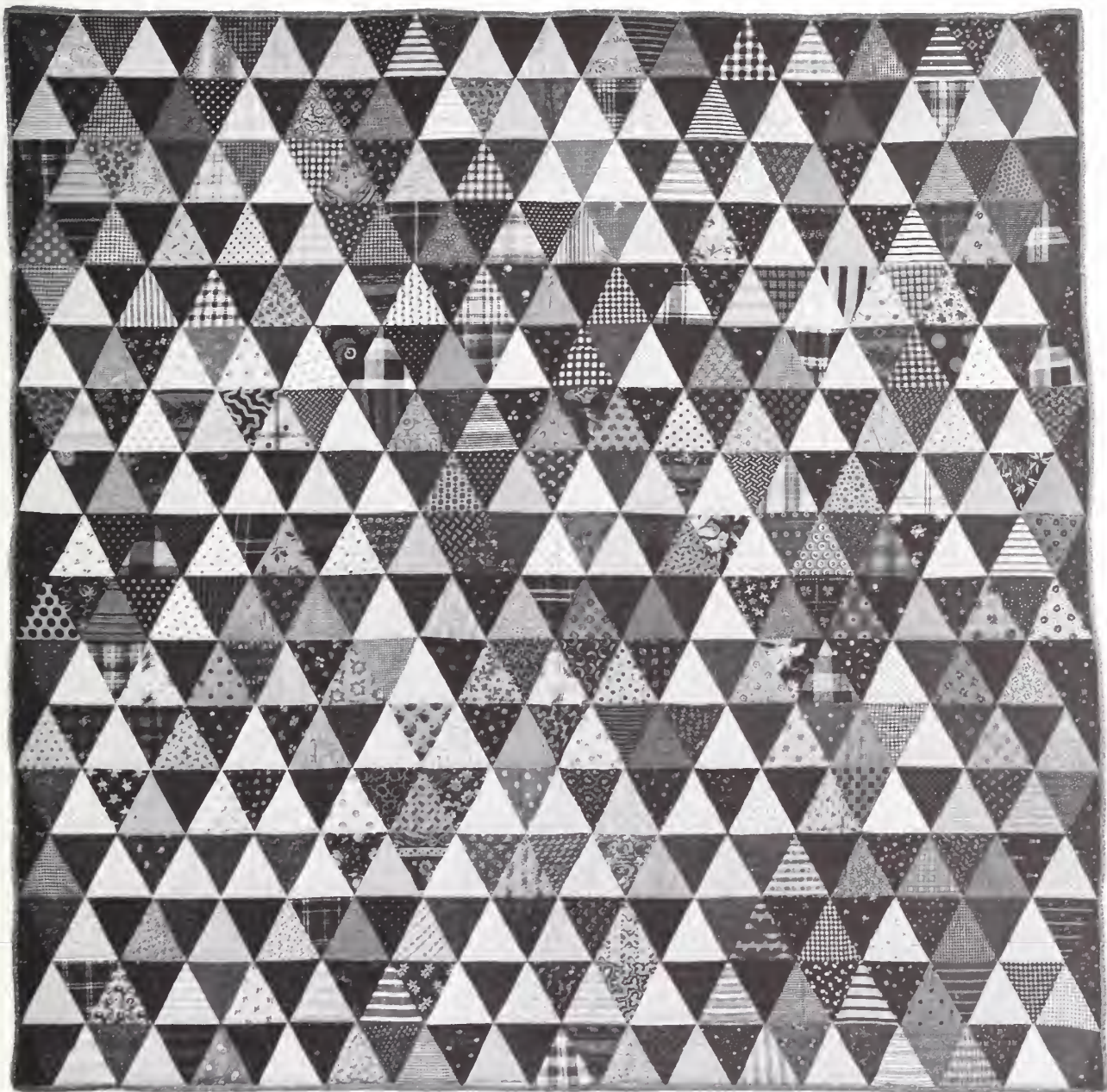
This immense, sustained outpouring of energy produced a huge body of work from which many quilt exhibitions could be drawn. Collections exist based on needlework finesse, historical importance, regional associations, and of course, beauty. This exhibition is based simply on a high regard for the visual content of pieced quilts, regardless of craftsmanship, age, condition, area, or history. It concentrates on examples which provide a cohesive and strong visual statement. There is a large body of applique quilts which use stylized designs drawn from nature and are a distinct American contribution to the art of quilting. But applique quilts are usually more decorative, and, while often beautiful, seem to lack the stronger visual characteristics we see in pieced quilts.

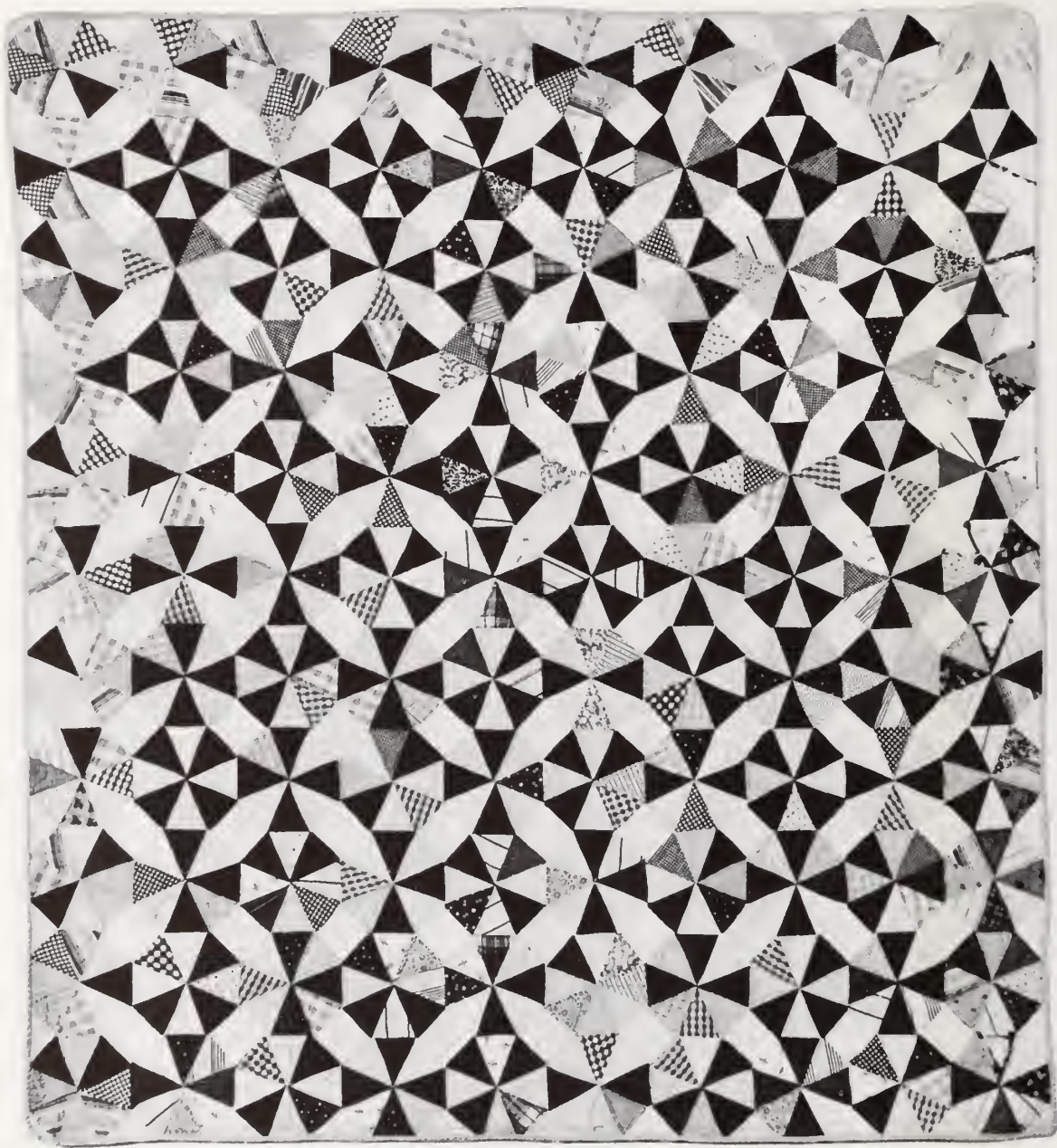
Quilt makers did in effect paint with fabrics, laying on colors and textures, borrowing and trading here and there or purchasing particular colors or patterns of materials they needed to complete their designs. In all periods there are to be found in pieced quilts both unique and conventional designs; within the framework of the latter each maker had full liberty in terms of colors, arrangements, sizes

of the blocks and her own variations. So no two quilts are ever alike; each reflects the sensibilities and visual skills of its maker. Moreover, it must be emphasized that the planning of these tops was in no sense haphazard. Even the simplest show the highest degree of control for visual effect. Many are too carefully designed, too authoritative to be called primitive or naive. Rather, there was at work a traditional American approach to design, vigorous, simple, reductive, "flat," and a bold use of color, which can be traced throughout American art.

Contemporary accounts speak of the great delight people took in the visual aspects of these quilts when they were made. They were in no sense foreign or strange to them, as if they were some form of avant-garde art. There are many extremely strong visually, many beautiful in a more decorative sense, many of just average visual content, part of a larger body with its own trends, styles, techniques and history. The best were valued aesthetically when they were made and have lost none of their power with passing time and fashions, exhibiting those extraordinary visual qualities which are ageless.

Jonathan Holstein





Catalogue

In few cases is it possible to positively establish the provenance of these quilts. However, the majority were made in the states in which they were collected, and that is indicated in the notes. Quotation marks indicate established patterns, all other titles are descriptive. All dimensions are in inches, height precedes width.

1. Striped squares. Pennsylvania. ca. 1875. Cotton. 73 x 71.
2. "Crazy." Pennsylvania. ca. 1875. Wool. 88 x 70.
3. "Tree Everlasting." Pennsylvania. ca. 1850. Cotton. 72 x 73.
4. "Log Cabin" blocks arranged in a pattern called "Straight Furrow." New Jersey. ca. 1875. Wool, silk and cotton. 90 x 86.
5. Stripes. Maine. ca. 1875. Silk. $63\frac{1}{2}$ x $41\frac{1}{2}$. (Made from silk cigar bands.)
6. "Baby's Blocks." Pennsylvania. ca. 1875. Cotton. 78 x 73. Illus. p. 6.
7. Puffs. Maine. ca. 1875. Wool and cotton. 76 x 70.
8. "Wild Goose Chase." Pennsylvania. ca. 1860. Cotton. 83 x 83.
9. Triangles. Pennsylvania. ca. 1870. Cotton. $80\frac{1}{2}$ x 78. Illus. p. 11.
10. "Wild Goose Chase." Pennsylvania. ca. 1875. Cotton. 87 x 77.
11. "Roman Cross." Pennsylvania. ca. 1920. Silk and rayon. 81 x 81.
12. "Crazy." Vermont. ca. 1920. Cotton and rayon faille. $87\frac{1}{2}$ x 63.
13. Bars. ca. 1860. Wool. $83\frac{1}{2}$ x $69\frac{1}{2}$. (An Amish quilt from Pennsylvania.)
14. "Schoolhouse." New Hampshire. ca. 1880. Cotton. 77 x 76.
15. "Double Irish Chain." Pennsylvania. ca. 1850. Cotton. $93\frac{1}{2}$ x 78.
16. "Pineapples." New Jersey. ca. 1850. Cotton. 92 x 81.
17. Stripes with "crazy" center panel. Pennsylvania. ca. 1875. Silk and velvet. 78 x 75.
18. "Crazy." Massachusetts. ca. 1860. Cotton. 84 x $100\frac{1}{2}$.
19. "Robbing Peter to Pay Paul." Pennsylvania. ca. 1860. Cotton. 77 x 84.
20. "King's Crown" type block. Pennsylvania. ca. 1850. Cotton. 79 x 79.
21. "Log Cabin" blocks arranged in a pattern called "Courthouse Steps." Pennsylvania. ca. 1875. Silk and wool. $89\frac{1}{2}$ x $83\frac{1}{2}$.
22. "Four Patch Block." ca. 1875. Wool. 84 x 68. (An Amish quilt from Pennsylvania.)
23. Stepped rectangles. Pennsylvania. ca. 1875. Cotton. $79\frac{1}{2}$ x 78.
24. Square patches in cross form. New Jersey. ca. 1860. Cotton. $87\frac{1}{2}$ x $87\frac{1}{2}$.
25. "Triple Irish Chain." Pennsylvania. ca. 1875. Cotton and wool. 78 x 75.
26. "Sawtooth." Massachusetts. ca. 1875. Cotton. $77\frac{1}{2}$ x $88\frac{1}{2}$. Illus. p. 4.
27. "Four Patch Block." Pennsylvania. ca. 1860. Cotton. 86 x 65.
28. "Log Cabin" blocks arranged in a pattern called "Straight Furrow." Pennsylvania. ca. 1860. Cotton. 74 x 74.
29. "Crazy." Pennsylvania. ca. 1875. Cotton and wool. $78\frac{1}{2}$ x $53\frac{1}{2}$.
30. "Log Cabin" blocks arranged in a pattern called "Courthouse Steps." Pennsylvania. ca. 1850. Cotton, silk and wool. 84 x 73.
31. "Double Irish Chain." Maine. ca. 1850. Cotton. 86 x 74.
32. Square patch. New Jersey. ca. 1875. Wool. 64 x 74.
33. "Log Cabin" blocks arranged in a pattern called "Barn Raising." Pennsylvania. ca. 1860. Cotton and wool. $71\frac{1}{2}$ x 75.
34. "Crazy" in strips. Vermont. ca. 1860. Cotton. $88\frac{1}{2}$ x 78. Illus. p. 9.

Opposite: "Kaleidoscope." Pennsylvania. ca. 1860. Cotton. $70\frac{1}{2}$ x $66\frac{1}{2}$.

35. "Road to California." Pennsylvania. ca. 1900. Cotton. 78 x 78.
36. "Wild Goose Chase." Pennsylvania. ca. 1850. Cotton. 67 x 55½.
37. Stripes. Pennsylvania. ca. 1880. Cotton. 84 x 84.
38. "Log Cabin" blocks arranged in a pattern called "Light and Dark." Pennsylvania. ca. 1875. Wool. 70 x 67.
39. "Flower Baskets." New Jersey. ea. 1880. Cotton. 69 x 67.
40. "Kaleidoscope." Pennsylvania. ea. 1860. Cotton. 70½ x 66½. Illus. p. 12.
41. "Eecentric Star." Pennsylvania. ea. 1875. 87½ x 81.
42. "Birds in the Air." Pennsylvania. ca. 1860. Cotton. 83 x 80.
43. Rainbow stripes. Pennsylvania. ea. 1860. Cotton. 73 x 80½.
44. "Log Cabin" blocks arranged in a pattern called "Barn Raising." New Jersey. ca. 1920. Cotton. 88 x 70. (A quilt top.)
45. "Crazy." Pennsylvania. ca. 1850. Cotton. 73 x 73. Illus. p. 15.
46. "Roman Square." New Jersey. ea. 1875. Cotton. 80 x 71.
47. "Ocean Waves." ea. 1870. Cotton. 78 x 96½. (Made in Sandgate, Vermont.)
48. "Crazy." Maine. ca. 1875. Cotton. 65½ x 34½. (A child's quilt.)
49. "Eastern Star." Pennsylvania. ea. 1840. Cotton. 33½ x 39. (A crib quilt.)
50. Triangles and bars. Massachusetts. ea. 1860. Cotton. 36 x 31. (A crib quilt.)
51. "Crazy." Pennsylvania. ea. 1860. Cotton. 37½ x 28½. (A crib quilt.)
52. "Around the World." New Hampshire. ea. 1920. Cotton. 79 x 101½.
53. "Basket of Seraps." Pennsylvania. ea. 1860. Cotton. 91 x 75.
54. "Shoo Fly." Vermont. ca. 1860. Cotton. 77 x 77.
55. "Crazy." Vermont. ca. 1900. Cotton. 75½ x 64.
56. Squares. Pennsylvania. ca. 1875. Cotton. 78 x 72½.
57. "Nine Patch Block." Pennsylvania. ca. 1900. Cotton. 68 x 68.
58. "Baby's Blocks." Massachusetts. ea. 1860. Cotton. 80 x 79.
59. "Log Cabin" blocks arranged in a pattern called "Courthouse Steps." Pennsylvania. ea. 1850. Wool. 86½ by 85.
60. Bars. Pennsylvania. ea. 1880. Cotton. 80 x 77.

Opposite: "Crazy." Pennsylvania. ca. 1850.
Cotton. 73 x 73.



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